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HEALTH

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Pranayama increases the dangers of cigarettes

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When I was just a school boy, cigarettes were referred to as "coffin nails." Every puff was another nail in the coffin. We were aware even then of the dangerous effects of tobacco upon health, but at that time, in the early 1940s, there was not much factual evidence. Today, there is. Yet surprisingly, cigarette smoking has actually increased. Billions of dollars are being spent trying to find a cure for cancer without any regard for its cause. We want our bad habits and good health, too. It can never happen, for we are defying nature's laws. If we remove the causes of disease, we can have natural good health. Some of these causes are difficult to remove because they are created by impure air, pollution from industry and motor vehicles. But we can always stop smoking.

Many sincere yoga students believe that they can continue to smoke cigarettes and offset the harmful effects by doing extra pranayama (breath control). This is a dangerous assumption. Pranayama opens up new cells to atmospheric air. These young, tender cells may be more vulnerable than the older,

more resilient, cells. Pranayama may actually be more dangerous for cigarette smokers. This is particularly true if one feels drowsy after doing pranayama. Or, after smoking a cigarette that "used to give them a kick," they now experience a let-down. The condition is popularly referred to as "shirt pocket poisoning." More technically, it is "carbon monoxide suffocation."

The carbon monoxide in the cigarette smoke displaces the oxygen in the lungs, creating a poison, causing chemical suffocation. Among the detrimental effects of this suffocation are a hazing of the mind, drowsiness, a reduction of visual sharpness, a slowing down of reflex reactions, an increase of blood pressure and, among longer range effects, hardening of the arteries. Nausea and dizziness often accompany these reactions, indicating a reduction of the output of blood from the heart.

In the normal metabolism of bodily processes, carbon monoxide and carbon dioxide are created when hemoglobin gets broken down in the blood. Normally, in a healthy nonsmoker, less than one percent of this hemoglobin gets broken down each day. But in the light smoker it's about three percent, and in a heavy smoker eight percent or more.

Above the one percent range, a slowing of thought as well as feelings of being tired and lethargic are observed. When a three percent level is reached, visual sharpness is impaired and acute sensitivity to light is experienced. It may here be noted the relationship between blood impurity and the increased need for eye glasses. At five percent the skin appears to be shallow and often takes on an ashen or dusky hue. Babies born to women in this grouping already have a bloodstream set for all the diseases associated with addiction to nicotine. The child is actually born with the craving, and his or her skin often reflects the toxic state of the mother.

At seven percent, heart disease is a corollary. Susceptibility to any condition considered epidemic is suggested by a reading of twelve percent or more. Here the blood vessels are heavily coated with cholesterol, inviting disease into the body. Cigarette smoking reduces the blood flow, but raises the blood pressure.

There is a dangerous trend among modern yoga teachers to separate one's lifestyle from yoga. Immoral persons who indulge in bad habits and pose as experts in pranayama and meditation call themselves yogis simply because they have a flexible body. This is an obstruction to spiritual life.

Dr. Swami Gitanandawas a yoga teacher in Pondicherry, India, the author of 25 books and publisher of Yoga Life, a journal still continued today. He passed away in December, 1993, at 88.